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ABSTRACT

The complex theory of knowledge and cognitive interests by the sociologist Jurgen Habermas, the dominant critical theorist in present day Germany, is applicable to current composition pedagogy. According to Habermas, all knowledge is shaped and used in three ways: in technical ways for instrumental reasons; in practical ways for socio-cultural reasons; and in emancipatory ways for reasons that relate to dependency and power. Thorough analysis suggests how each point is germane to the study and practice of composing. For example, there are times when writing instructors take as primary the technical interest in an effort to control their students as if they were objects to be shaped and molded for a pre-ordained kind of work. By the same token, most instructors realize that the practical interest must sometimes be primary, especially when it is necessary to discover what socio-cultural patterns of meaning sometimes prevent students from being willing to practice what instructors believe writers in the academy must do. Finally, instructors sometimes sense that students are in college or the composition classroom against their will. The emanicipatory interest then becomes primary and students' sense of autonomy and responsibility must be treated as paramount. Students are afforded the opportunity to reflect, to discuss, and to write about the conditions that led to these feelings of powerlessness that can render them dependent on forces beyond their control. All three interests are required for success in human endeavor, and for success as writers and as teachers of writers. (KEH)

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Confusing the Technical, the Practical, and the Emancipatory: A Habermasian Critique of Composition Pedagogy

A Paper Presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication, Seattle, Washington, March 1989

We need not listen very long to leading composition theorists to learn that our field is an expanding one. As David Bartholomae pointed out recently in a published version of his 1988 address to the CCCC convention, "We now produce more words than any single person can possibly read. We cannot be kept up with" (48). To expand as we have over the past two decades--or to emerge as Stephen North might say--our researchers have borrowed heavily from the ideas and techniques of other disciplines, not hesitating one bit to use the quantitative methodology of western psychology while simultaneously admitting that phenomenological methods rooted in the traditions of anthropology may sometimes be appropriate for our studies of classroom writers. And for the past several years, the pages of our journals are just as likely to be filled with pieces about the sociology of knowledge as they are with articles about our rhetorical heritage. But of all the borrowing we have done,

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perhaps it is our use of European philosophy and psychoanalytic theory that has gained the most prominence in recent years. I have not tallied the number of references to them in precise terms, but it seems to be increasingly difficult to avoid the names of Derrida or Lacan when thumbing through a copy of Freshman English News. And Michel Foucault's name is very likely to appear under Linda Flowers' as we scan the bibliographies in College English.

But one European's name remains missing from virtually all of our scholarly writing. There is a chapter about him in a recent book by Sonja Foss entitled Contemporary Perspectives in Rhetoric, a source that I am indebted to for its useful bibliography. But for the most part, we have simply neglected to borrow from him. This omission is surprising as well as puzzling. In fact, when considering his reputation, it is almost incomprehensible that we have not begun to take a close look at his work. I refer to the critical theorist Jurgen Habermas.

Thomas McCarthy, his major translator, calls Habermas "the dominant figure on the intellectual scene in Germany today" (ix). Peter Wilby, writing in New Society, calls him "one of the intellectual giants of the century" (667). Eric Bredo and Walter Feinberg have stressed that Habermas is "the foremost representative of [European] critical theory" (272). In fact,

most commentators agree that there is scarcely a word being written about contemporary social theory that has not been influenced by Habermas. Why, then, has he been largely ignored by compositionists--even those interested in formulating theories that can begin to account for the social nature of composing?

Part of the difficulty may lie in the breadth of Habermas's scholarship. His densely written books are stuffed with an encyclopedic range of references and allusions. Most of us who studied rhetoric and composition in graduate school simply are not very conversant with the nineteenth-century German philosophical tradition that underpins Habermas's work. And although many of us have heard of the Frankfurt School and know it flourished during the middle of this century under the guidance of Max Horkheimer, few of us in the United States have had access to the German texts of Hans Gadamer and Theodor Adorno--texts that have just recently begun to be translated, yet are often considered critical to an understanding of the Frankfurt School and of Habermasian thought. Finally, there is an inherent difficulty with Habermas's writing style itself. Whether he is read in German or in English translation, his prose is so convoluted and opaque that one of his critics was led to complain that reading Habermas is like reading an Engineering textbook in Swahili (Wilby 669).

So despite Habermas's interest in speech act theory, universal pragmatics, and what he terms the systematically distorted nature of communication in Western technocracies, i.e., despite his interest in ideas directly related to rhetoric and communication, Habermas largely remains an unused resource in our field, referred to occasionally by those working in the field of speech but seldom directly cited by those interested in writing.

However, his influence, as I have already suggested, has been pervasive in all fields linked to the study of the human social condition. And some of his thought, in the form of basic premises, has seeped into the work of several scholars concerned with student writers whose social experience makes success in writing classrooms difficult. When Ira Shor discusses the struggles of his working class writing students in Critical Teaching and Everyday Life, what he begins to suggest is that the lives of these students have been culturally dominated by a kind of American corporate technocratic double-speak, distorted communication that in essence tells working-class youth to shut up and accept the status quo. Such a view echoes Habermas's notion that communication can serve a repressive function in our culture when it is limited--and legitimized--by the technical needs of our corporations and government (Bredo and Feinberg 273). When Patricia Bizzell in a recent article questions

whether we can ignore the personal and social elements in academic discourse and in our students writing, she is reflecting Habermas's assertion that we need to recognize that different realms of meaning are equally valid in all communities and that technico-discursive knowledge should not necessarily be thought of as superior to the practical knowledge we all learn from each other in everyday interaction. And when James Berlin classifies current classroom rhetorical approaches into three basic categories--the cognitive, the expressionistic, and the social-epistemic--he is essentially employing a system akin to one used by Habermas to categorize what he calls the cognitive interests of human knowledge. In fact, Berlin's categories seem to directly correspond to Habermas's notion of the way all knowledge is shaped and used: in technical ways for instrumental reasons, in practical ways for socio-cultural reasons, and in emancipatory ways for reasons that relate to dependency and power (Held 255). Habermas emphasizes how broadly he conceives these categories in this way:

> Orientation toward technical control, toward mutual understanding in the conduct of life, and toward emancipation from seemingly "natural" constraint establish specific viewpoints from which we can apprehend reality as such in any way whatsoever. (311)

As we can tell from this passage, Habermas has outlined for himself an ambitious agenda with this theory of knowledge and

human interests, maintaining as he does that it can be used to analyze all aspects of human endeavor. (By the way, Habermas's ambition becomes especially clear when we realize that this comprehensive theoretical perspective represents just one small slice of his work.) Analyzing the field of rhetoric or scrutinizing the validity of academic discourse would be difficult enough for most of us. But unlike those of us in composition, Habermas operates from the tradition of grand theory making, much like his predecessors from the 19th century.

Despite its complexity, this theory is worth focusing on. By looking at it closely for a moment, I believe it will become clear how an explicit formulation of it can shed a little light on the contentiousness--and perhaps even confusion--that too often marks our discussions about what composition is, how it might be learned, and what it is actually good for.

At the core of this theory is Habermas's idea of human cognitive interests. Essentially, these define basic orientations and primary assumptions about what counts as knowledge in any given field. In other words, whenever he asks himself how knowledge is arrived at, Habermas begins with some basic questions: What interests are being served by this knowledge--who or what stands to benefit from it and why? As David Held points out, Habermas begins to answer these questions

by arguing "from and understanding of humans as both toolmaking and language-using animals" (255). This understanding leads him to define two of his interests in terms of what people need to produce their material existence through the control of objects and what they need to "communicate with others through the use of [commonly] understood symbols within the context of rule-grounded institutions" (Held 255). Perhaps the words produce, control, and communicate are the critical terms here, for Habermas takes these terms and integrates them into a schema that describes two essential ways of knowing. The need for the production of objects and control over them spawns what Habermas calls the technical interest. It unfolds through the medium of work or what Habermas calls instrumental action. And it has given rise to the possibility of empirical-analytic science, a science that arranges knowledge in a never ending series of facts often accepted in an a priori basis and that are then plugged into a hierarchical chain of deductive reasoning. On another level, humankind's need for communication spawns what Habermas calls the practical interest. It unfolds through the medium of interaction or language, and it has given rise to the possibility of historical-hermeneutics, a way of interpreting the meaning systems of given peoples and cultures. Its goal is to achieve understanding by making explicit the patterns of consensus and

reciprocity that make human interaction possible. If the technical interest is concerned with the "how" (How can we grow more crops on the great plains? How can we get students to do what professional writers do?), then the practical interest is concerned with the "what" (What do the farmers think about national agricultural policy? What does our students' experience contribute to the way they feel about writing?).

There is, though, a third cognitive interest, one that Habermas contends is just as valid and just as prevalent as the other two, if not more so. It lies in "the human capacity to be self-reflective and self-determining, to act rationally" (Held 255). Out of this capacity grows an ability to achieve "autonomy and responsibility" (Habermas 314). Knowledge produced to attain this end resides in what Habermas calls the emancipatory interest. It unfolds through the medium of power or asymmetrical relations of constraint and dependency, and it gives rise to what many social theorists such as Richard Bernstein call the critical social sciences (193). As Habermas explains, these are the sciences of social action, geared toward discovering when knowledge governed by the technical and practical interests "express frozen . . . relations of dependence that can in principle be transformed" (310). In many ways, as Bernstein points out, the Socratic model of attaining self-knowledge

through a process of dialogue is akin to what Habermas has in mind. Participants in such dialogue can "achieve self-knowledge and self-reflection which are therapeutic and effect a cognitive, affective, and practical transformation . . . toward autonomy" (Bernstein 199). But I use this Socratic example with some trepidation, for it presupposes an open public sphere that encourages debate and rational discussion, a public forum that Habermas contends does not exist in most contemporary cultures because of the primacy of the technical interest. But in any case, despite the fact that the emancipatory interest often lies dormant in contemporary public life, Habermas maintains that it is the one realm of knowledge that has the capacity of questioning the premises of the other two (314). Bernstein emphasizes this point in his interpretation of Habermas: "Implicit in the knowledge guided by the technical and practical interests is the demand for . . . the conditions of emancipation, i.e., the ideal state of affairs in which nonalienating work and free interaction can be manifested" (198). If the technical interest asks <u>how</u>, and the practical interest asks <u>what</u>, the emancipatory interest asks <u>how</u> and <u>what</u> and <u>why</u>: How has this culture prevented me from fully and actively participating in it? What historical and social constraints led me to accept this situation? And why haven't I tried to change it?

Few of us would deny that his theory can be applied in some ways to the study and practice of composing. When we want to discover how to prepare our students to please professors from other disciplines, we pinpoint the features of academic discourse and reason in a deductive way that these features can be reproduced by our students if they follow a hierarchically arranged sequence of activities. In other words, there are times when we all take as primary the technical interest in an effort to control our students as if they were objects to be shaped and molded for a pre-ordained kind of work. By the same token, most of us realize that the practical interest must sometimes be primary, especially when we need to discover what socio-cultural patterns of meaning sometimes prevent our students from being willing to practice what we believe writers in the academy must do. In other words, there are times when we interpret our students' language and social interaction to arrive at the intersubjective norms that govern their behavior. Finally there are those of us who sometimes sense that our students are in college--or in our classrooms--against their will. At that time, we often offer them a chance to reflect, to discuss and write about the conditions that led to these feelings of powerlessness in the face of an academic and economic system that can render them dependent on forces beyond their control. When we open our

classrooms in this way, we begin to realize that the emancipatory interest is primary and that our students' sense of autonomy and responsibility must be treated as paramount.

Habermas claims, and I would agree, that all three interests are required for success in human endeavor (256). And at the risk of sounding as if I am advocating an eclectic approach to teaching writing, I want to assert that all three interests are required for success as writers and as teachers of writers. What we should guard against is not the appearance of being atheoretical or eclectic through our use of all three interests, instead we need to simply avoid confusing one interest for another.

Of course, such confusion is understandable. We live in a culture that worships the technical interest, placing it in a position that used to be reserved for the gods. As a result, the powers of the empirical-analytical sciences are brought to bear on a whole range of social problems that may be better understood and solved in other ways. For instance, we spend billions of dollars developing drugs to manipulate and control the chemical processes that we think give rise to depression, yet we spend almost no money at all developing practical understanding of the estranged social relationships that may govern the meaning systems of depressed people. Furthermore, most medical insurers

will not pay a dime toward the long-term psychoanalysis that might enable people to openly reflect on the nature of their depression and rationally act to transform it. As this example begins to illustrate, we are using knowledge from the technical realm to solve problems that are at their root problems of frozen social misunderstanding and, perhaps most strikingly, problems of profound powerlessness.

What implications does such confusion have for those of us who work in the field of composition? Probably more than I have space to mention. But for one thing, this confusion may go a long way toward explaining why those who do protocol analysis cannot seem to talk with those who are disciples of Ken Macrorie. They are simply working at cross purposes. Several other implications come to mind, too. For instance, we may not want to spend all of our class time on technical concerns in the hope that our arrangement of activities and exercises will prompt our students to become socialized into the ways of the academy. If Habermas has anything to teach us, it is that technical knowledge will not address the problems of the practical interest. By the same token, we may not want to spend all of our time prompting our students to be expressive about the nature of their lives in the hope that such expressiveness will prompt them to reflect about the power relations that prevent them from being

autonomous. Again, if Habermas has anything to teach us, it is that practical knowledge about everyday life will not address the problems of the emancipatory interest. If we take the emancipatory interest to be primary, as Habermas does, then we must open up our classrooms, open them so that they can become the public forums of reflection and rationality that are so often absent in our culture, open them to discussions about the nature of power in the academy, and, perhaps most importantly, open them to the possibility that both socially engendered patterns of meaning and technical rationality can be questioned.

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